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By John W. White November 14, 2025

"It's only three or four words."

That was one woefully insufficient rationale offered by administrators here at the University of North Florida after faculty members like myself were told to alter our course materials to remove four specific terms ("diversity," "equity," "inclusion," and "culture") that far-right state policymakers had recently deemed inappropriate. "It's the law and we must follow the law" was another.

This fall I have encountered this refrain — "we must follow the law" — repeatedly. I refused to change my syllabus, and my university's administration was not pleased. I was told I was hurting the university for refusing to alter my course materials, for having filed a grievance through my union, and for going to the press about state-mandated censorship.

I was told that I was potentially hurting my students by jeopardizing the approval status of the courses I was teaching. My teacher-education courses — which had until this past summer been state approved after meeting a myriad of written rules — were now threatened with being "not approved" via new, unwritten rules. (And so my students' course credit might suddenly be determined to not count toward their degrees.)

I was told in a plethora of ways — some subtle and some overt — that I was jeopardizing not just my job but also the long-term welfare of my department and, with that, the jobs of my peers. Over the course of a few weeks in September,

I went from being an award-winning faculty member who had served in numerous high-profile faculty-leadership roles (including being president of our faculty's governance organization and a member of the university's Board of Trustees) to being *persona non grata*. Such is today's academic climate in states with far-right state governments.

My saga began just before classes started for the fall semester. I teach in the College of Education and Human Services, and my departmental colleagues and I were told at our first meeting of the new academic year that, over the summer, the university had unilaterally — and outside all normal protocols for course changes — removed the aforementioned four terms from our course descriptors and course objectives to meet "new rules" from the state. We were told that to be "in compliance" with the state's new rules, we must remove those terms from our syllabi.

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Rather, state administrators cunningly worked outside of state law to force censorship on my colleagues, on me, and on our students. In their zeal to control the ideas that Florida's students can explore in their university classrooms, Florida's policymakers eschewed their own laws to engage yet again in the censoring of theories and ideas that the extreme right finds threatening to their goals. (Previous instances of this tendency include Florida's "Stop WOKE Act" and Senate Bill 266.)

Florida's "Sunshine Law," passed in 1967, was designed to make all public work transparent and open to scrutiny. Yet in trying to work around a 2022 federal injunction that had called eerily similar censorious actions by the state "positively dystopian," Florida's Department of Education and the politically appointed Board of Governors (who oversee the state university system) created and then began diligently enforcing new verbal directives.

This is actually part of a national trend: As *Inside Higher Ed* recently reported, far-right state governments have recently been enacting new verbal rules for their universities that are not published and thus harder to fight. The policies that disrupted my course materials were not announced in any public meeting, no minutes were published, and the subsequent rules were never codified, despite state laws requiring all of these things.

Nonetheless, university administrators across the state rushed to accede to the subsequent demands. They did so first unilaterally and then via mandates to faculty that we excise the troublesome terms from our syllabi. Despite some pushback from lower-level administrators that these kinds of changes required due process, upper-level university administrators held firm.

What is perhaps more disturbing than this extralegal administrative crackdown is that most of the faculty affected by these new rules quickly, if begrudgingly, acceded to the demands. It's easy to understand why. We faced threats to our programs, to our students, and to our jobs — and all of that on top of two state initiatives that have rattled faculty in Florida. The first, the passage of Senate Bill 7044 in 2022, created "post tenure review," a process by which each institution's Board of Trustees could revoke a faculty member's tenure regardless of their annual review ratings by their chair. The second, a demand last spring from Gov. Ron DeSantis's Florida Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) that each university must provide an accounting of every piece of faculty scholarship and grants, feels like an overt form of state monitoring.

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Despite the fact — or because of it — that the state's new "rules" are nowhere codified, they have proven powerful. Faculty, working now in a state of fear, have no way to know what they are — or are not — legally allowed to teach. Can we talk about the need to teach diverse texts? Can we talk about the differences between equity and equality? Can we teach about inclusion in special education? Can we broach topics related to students and their respective cultures?

Florida's faculty cannot know when or if they are being monitored and potentially reported for talking with their students about issues related to these and other concerns. In seeking answers to these questions from university administrators, faculty members are generally told "we don't know," and are advised to err on the side of caution. As a result, many of my colleagues have not only gone along with the state's demands that they excise terms from their syllabi, but have gone even further, removing not just those terms but related topics as well.

The censoring of ideas is always dangerous. The state-mandated censorship of valid academic theories taught in universities is both terrifying and hegemonic. State policymakers engaged in circumventing the very laws that they enacted in order to mandate censorship represents a new low, one that is indeed "positively dystopian."

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

About the Author

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